

# ethiopia

The Christian Art  
of an African Nation

the Langmuir Collection  
Peabody Museum of Salem

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# ethiopia

The Christian Art of an African Nation

by

Elizabeth Cross Langmuir

Stanislaw Chojnacki

Peter Fetchko

the Langmuir Collection  
Peabody Museum of Salem

*Elizabeth Cross Langmuir*

I.S.B.N. 0-87577-057-6

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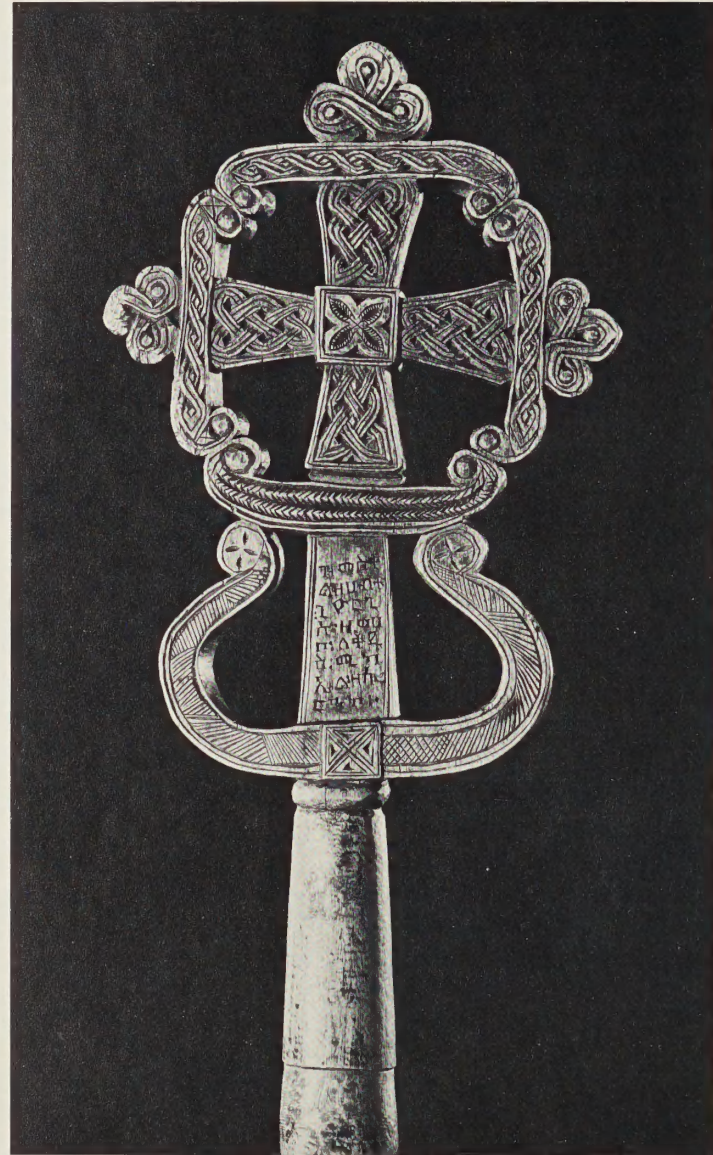
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No. 1

No. 1  
Processional Cross, 17th century style, wood,  
height 33.9 cm, Langmuir 3.

Inscription: "This cross belongs to Habte Giorgio.  
He gave it to [the church of] Saint Michael of  
Sarinko".



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1966, when at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, we first undertook the preservation, research, and cataloguing of Ethiopian crosses and newly discovered icons long hidden in monasteries and churches. The Curator of the new museum at the Institute, Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki chose for my special project the research and cataloguing of icons. My work then was based to a great extent on his scholarship and deep understanding of Ethiopian art. Eine Moore, who later joined us, specialized in the study of the hand, neck, and processional crosses. I am deeply indebted to them both and to the staff, whose director was Dr. Richard K. P. Pankhurst, and to my husband, Charles R. Langmuir, who was involved intimately in collecting for the museum and its promotion.

Without this background the Langmuir Collection would never have been made. Its "mission" was to form a collection that might be shown and kept intact in the United States. The Peabody Museum of Salem was the first to recognize the worth of this "mission," and, under the directorship of Ernest Dodge and Peter Fetchko, plans were made for an exhibition and catalogue which would bring to the attention of the public and scholars this rare and beautiful collection of Christian art from the African continent.

Without the assistance of Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, who generously shared his knowledge, acquired during his twenty-six-year residence in Ethiopia, this exhibit and catalogue would not have been possible. I should like to thank also the staff and volunteers of the Peabody Museum for all their services and favors so generously bestowed. Particularly, I should like to thank Elizabeth Pollock for her imaginative design of the exhibit and catalogue, Frank Duley for making an exhibit design a reality, and John Grimes, whose skill in the manipulation of light fixtures and installation of the items greatly enhanced all our endeavors.

Additional staff members who have contributed to making my work at the Peabody Museum a pleasure and this catalogue possible are Lucy Batchelder for her assistance with the cataloguing of the collection, Geraldine Ayers, whose patient typing of the manuscript is deeply appreciated, Barbara Edkins, Librarian, for her sleuthing in the library stacks, and Mark Sexton for his skillful photography.

Finally, I should like to thank Edmund Barry Gaither, of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, for the interest he has shown in the exhibition; and Mr. James Payne whose sensitive photography of Ethiopian subjects greatly enhanced the exhibition.

**Elizabeth Cross Langmuir**

Peabody Museum of Salem  
November 1978





No. 2

Folding painted parchment in original embossed leather cover (back cover missing), 15th or early 16th century, length 89 cm, Langmuir 368  
See No. 11 for color detail

Probably painted at a scriptorium influenced by the Monastery of Gunda Gundie.

Contents of the nine folios, left to right:

1. Apostles Peter and Paul
2. Andrew and Philip
3. James and John
4. Nathaniel, Bartholomew, and Thomas
5. Saint George
6. Virgin and Child with two archangels
7. Saint Claude
8. James, Son of Alpheus, Matthew and "unidentified saint"
9. Mark, Jacob, and "unidentified saint".



# INTRODUCTION



**Historical Background** Around 1000 B.C., in the southwestern tip of Arabia there developed numerous kingdoms whose writing systems were related to that of the Phoenicians, and, like the Phoenicians, they were noted for their maritime trade, which included ports in the Red Sea, on the Horn of Africa and as far away as the Indies. The Semitic language spoken in that area is known as Sabaeen, a name derived from Saba (Sheba), the most important and long lasting of these kingdoms.

Several centuries after 1000 B.C. Sabaeen speakers began to settle on the African coast of the Red Sea, founding the important trading port of Adulis and eventually settling the interior of the Ethiopian Plateau. Around 500 B.C., descendants of these Sabaeans founded the civilization of Aksum, which was a mixture of the introduced Sabaeen culture with that of the indigenous African Cushitic cultures.

Numerous inscriptions in Sabaeen, Greek, and Geez, the classical language of Ethiopia, are known. Gradually, Geez supplanted Greek as the official language in the fourth century A.D. However, Greek influence for a period was strong, and Aksumite coins bearing both Geez and Greek are common. In fact, it is from a Greek merchant, writing between the first and third century A.D., that the earliest firsthand description of the Aksumite Empire has come down to us in the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea". The author of this trading manual describes the Port of Adulis and states that eight days' journey inland lay the metropolis of the Aksumites, where was carried all the ivory from beyond the Nile and whence it was exported to Adulis and then on to the Roman Empire.

Christianity was introduced to the Aksumite Empire in the fourth century A.D. and proved to be an event having a tremendous effect on Ethiopia's subsequent cultural development, acting as a unifying agent in this racially mixed and multi-lingual African kingdom. Evidence supports the fact that it was introduced by two Syrians who became influential at the Aksumite Court and were responsible for the conversion of the king's son. One of these Syrians, Frumentus, eventually requested the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria to send a bishop to Ethiopia. The Patriarch responded by investing



Frumentus himself as the first Ethiopian bishop, and since that time, until 1959, subsequent bishops, with few exceptions, have been invested by the Egyptian Patriarch. Additional evidence supporting a fourth-century introduction of Christianity are surviving inscriptions of King Ezana. In one of these, commemorating his conquest of the Nubians, he no longer styles himself son of Mahrem, the pagan god of war, as in earlier ones, but simply the son of Ella Amida, the previous king and his father. He also subscribes to the "power of the Lord of Heaven", which certainly seems to indicate a change of allegiance, and coins minted during his reign substitute the cross for pagan symbols of the moon.

The break in the Christian church caused by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. had important consequences for the pattern of Christianity developing in Ethiopia. Primarily, it separated the Egyptian and Ethiopian churches from the western and Greek Orthodox church. The dispute involved the nature or natures of Christ. The Monophysite view held by both the Egyptian and Ethiopian church, and condemned by the Council, was that there was only one nature in Christ. His humanity was inseparably absorbed in his divinity. The view held by the Council, on the other hand, was that there were two natures, one human and one divine. At this time, Ethiopia apparently became a refuge for Monophysite believers escaping the persecutions resulting from the Council. To this period is attributed the introduction of monasticism by the "nine saints" of Ethiopian tradition. They are believed to have been monks expelled from Syria, which at that time was a stronghold of the Monophysite faith.

During the period of Islamic expansion in the Near East and Africa in the seventh century, Ethiopia gradually became more and more isolated from the outside world, and it is only in the sixteenth century, with the arrival of the Portuguese, that we obtain a comprehensive view of historical developments. However, there apparently was a major dynastic change caused by dissenting Cushitic elements in the twelfth century, which overthrew the dominant Semitic aristocracy. This new Zagué Dynasty, as it has been called, was still Christian and more or less maintained the cultural contiguity of the past. One of its greatest achievements was the construction of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the capitol of the Zagué Dynasty in Lasta Province. These churches, carved from the living rock, are among the wonders of the world, and the history of their construction, still shrouded in mystery, is only now being slowly revealed. In the thirteenth century, the Zagué Dynasty was overthrown, and the restoration of the so-called Solomonic Dynasty, which claimed descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, was reestablished.

In the ensuing centuries, conflicts with neighboring Moslem kingdoms and pagan tribal groups within the country were epidemic. The state, however, gradually consolidated its strength and extended its borders, and a period of relative prosperity resulted. Finally, in 1520, the first European eyewitness accounts are provided by the Portuguese Embassy, which was sent to Ethiopia in search for a base from which to establish a sea



route to the East Indies. Moslem expansion had all but blocked Europe's important link with Asia, and Europe's long sought goal to reach India by circumnavigating Africa had been first accomplished just twenty-two years before by Vasco da Gama and his crew.

European knowledge of Ethiopia at this time was based more on a strange myth than it was on accurate geography. As far back as the twelfth century, during the Crusades, it was believed that Europe could not withstand renewed onslaughts by the Moslems and the only hope lay in a powerful "Eastern King" who would come to the aid of the hard-pressed Christians. His name was Prester John, and centuries of search for this elusive king finally led to Ethiopia. Portuguese maps of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries describe Ethiopia as the "Land of Prester John"!

In 1526, the year of the departure of the Portuguese Embassy, Moslem warriors under the leadership of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, nicknamed Grañ, invaded Ethiopia, and the darkest hour of its history was at hand. Moslem conquerors overran the greater part of the kingdom plundering and burning churches and monasteries. The full extent of the loss will never be known; however, surviving manuscripts, churches, and icons from before this period are witness to the glory of a vanished Ethiopian heritage. In 1541, Christopher da Gama, son of Vasco da Gama, arrived in Ethiopia with a small contingent of some 400 well-armed men, and with their aid Ahmad Grañ was defeated and the Moslems repulsed.

The price of this Portuguese aid, however, was allegiance to the Roman Church. The Jesuit mission succeeded eventually in converting the Court to the faith of Rome, but the Ethiopian people as a whole refused to abandon their old faith. The Ethiopian Orthodox religion was eventually restored and the Jesuits driven out of the country. Nevertheless, the Jesuit mission had a great impact on Ethiopian art.

In spite of religious and political upheavals in the seventeenth century, the arts underwent considerable development. Prosperity was centered around the new capital at Gondar, founded in the third decade of that century, but it was short-lived. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the monarchy lost much of its power, and it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the Empire finally recovered its unity and ancient greatness.





# ICONS

**An Historical Development of Paintings on Wood** The Christian art of Ethiopia is little known in the West, even though Christian themes continued to be reproduced there for a much longer period than any other center of Christianity in Africa. Indeed, the artistic achievements of the Ethiopians in the field of illuminating manuscripts, decorating churches with murals, and producing icons on wood are equal to those of the Copts and Christian Nubians. Yet, these accomplishments are seldom mentioned in art publications, and Ethiopian works of art are rarely represented in the museums of Europe and the United States.

The main reason for this neglect is the remoteness of the Ethiopian people who, for over two thousand years, lived in their African high plateau far from the currents of world history. In fact, during the European Middle Ages the very existence of the “hidden Empire” was a subject of mythology.

However, in the last fifty years Ethiopian illuminated manuscripts have gradually drawn the attention of a few specialists, and the rich corpus of mural painting has been occasionally mentioned by travelers. As for paintings on wood, their existence was virtually unknown. A few years ago scholars would hardly have suspected the existence of such a large number of icons in the country; yet, gradually, icons kept hidden in churches and monasteries came to light and have substantially broadened our knowledge of Ethiopian art. Beginning in the 1960's, with Ethiopia's opening to tourism, the beauty and exotic appeal of Ethiopian icons was discovered, and they appeared on the art market. The Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, collected some 300 icons, but probably twice as many went to private collectors; these icons are now scattered in Europe and the United States. The discovery of Ethiopian icons became an exciting event in the artistic life of Europe when, between 1972 and 1974, an important exhibition selected from the collections of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies traveled to the main centers of the European continent for the first time.

Why were Ethiopian icons virtually unknown before the 1960's? The answer lies in the very use of icons by the Ethiopians. In Ethiopian churches there are no iconostases, the screens or partitions with doors and tiers of icons that separate the bema (inner sanctum) from the nave in Eastern churches. The icons are not exhibited during the liturgy of the holy service, save in a few exceptional cases. Moreover, there is no thought of keeping icons in homes, as in Greece or Russia.

Nowadays, in some churches, devotional pictures, mostly of foreign origin, are hung on the wall of the bema, but this is obviously a recent introduction. It seems that in the past the main purpose of producing icons was devotional. A person would order an icon from an artist-priest and then offer it to a church to ensure the “salvation” of his soul. This, at times, is explained by inscriptions on the back of some icons. The icons donated to churches were kept either in the holy of holies together with books, crosses,

No. 3

Triptych, early 17th century, tempera on wood, height 26 cm, thickness 1.8 cm, Langmuir 116

*Center panel:* Upper register, Virgin and Child in the Santa Maria Maggiore style, flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael; lower register, four local saints: “unidentified”, Marqoryos, Ewostawos, and Takla Haymanot, two wearing hoods and two the turbans worn by Ethiopian monks. The first carries a fly whisk and all carry hand crosses as is the Ethiopian custom.

*Left panel:* Upper register, descent of Christ into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon with the king's daughter, Birutawit, in a tree.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Crucifixion which follows the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pattern and includes the horizontally displayed skull of Adam on the foot of the cross; lower register, Gabra Manfas Qiddus and another local saint.

The reverse of the side panels are partially covered with gesso and bear inscriptions and painted crosses probably added at a later date.

No. 4



No. 5



No. 4

Left panel of a diptych, 15th or early 16th century, tempera on wood, height 33 cm, Langmuir 113

Madonna and Child. The affectionate attitude of the Madonna and Child is in the Western style of the iconography of Mary which was introduced into Ethiopia in the fifteenth century, probably by Italian painters. This is indicated by the exposure of the Madonna's hair, which is alien to Eastern iconography. Byzantine and Greek artists always represented Mary wearing a large veil or *maphorion* covering her head. Flanking the Madonna on either side of her chair are the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. They do not carry swords, which is exceptional in fifteenth century Ethiopian art.

No. 5

Triptych, 16th century, tempera on wood height 25.2 cm, thickness 2.2 cm, Langmuir 84

Center panel: Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael holding erect swords. Mary is shown here in a sixteenth-century format that had become progressively stylized. Her figure is drawn as a triangle with her head forming its apex and the bottom border of her robe forming its base. Also characteristic of the sixteenth-century stylization is the Child always seated on Mary's right side while Mary holds her left hand in blessing. Her large veil is a Syrian *maphorion* which in this form is always red with stylized patterned border derived from Greek icons.

Left panel: Upper register; six Apostles; lower register, St. George on a white horse spearing a dragon.

Right panel: Upper register; six Apostles; lower register, St. Theodore on a red horse.

The reverse of the panels are gesso covered and the side panels are decorated with a single painted green cross.



## ICONS

and other paraphernalia or in church stores, often covered in leather. Since an icon was considered holy, the painting on wood was kept for centuries without being exhibited or moved. This explains the perfect state of conservation of some icons although they are several centuries old.

Like iconographers of other countries, Ethiopian painters seldom transposed images from the Holy Scriptures directly. Instead, they borrowed the ready-made models from Eastern and Western Christianity and transmitted these according to their religious beliefs and aesthetic tenets. Only in a limited number of cases did the iconographer create his own composition, uninfluenced by imported models.

The Virgin Mary is usually depicted occupying the central place in the icon's composition, thus epitomizing Ethiopia's devotion to the Mother of Christ. Throughout centuries of icon painting, Ethiopians followed both the Eastern and Western iconography of Mary. The earliest forms were derived from the Coptic art of Egypt. However, by the fifteenth century Western Renaissance models reached Ethiopia. This influence is exemplified by the icon No. 4 in which the Madonna is represented with her head uncovered and with long flowing hair. According to Eastern tradition, Mary is always shown wearing a large veil or Syrian *maphorion*, covering her body and head. In the sixteenth century there is an emerging trend of Greek influence: namely, Mary is depicted wearing a red *maphorion* (see icon No. 5 and 6) as in Cretan icons which were introduced in some form at that time. In these Greek-influenced icons the Child is seated on Mary's right arm and performs a gesture of blessing with His right hand.

The next form, called at first by Ethiopians "The Roman Virgin," eventually became the established manner of representing Mary down through the ensuing centuries. The model from which this was taken is the well-known image of the Virgin in the basilica Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, brought to Ethiopia by Jesuit missionaries. A copy of this picture was introduced into Ethiopia around 1600. It was characterized by the Child seated on the left arm of the Virgin. The Child holds a book in His left hand and blesses with His right hand. Mary wears a blue *maphorion* often ornamented by two stars, one on her forehead and one on her right arm. Moreover, the two fingers of her right hand are painted unusually long, and she holds a handkerchief in her left hand. These details have not changed through centuries of continuous copying, though several additions to this foreign model were made by Ethiopians.

The other form of Mary's iconography is the Virgin of Tenderness (a well-known Greek *Eleousa*). This form probably reached Ethiopia through two channels: imported Greek-Cretan paintings of the Virgin and paintings by Italians living in fifteenth-century Ethiopia who also painted the Virgin of Tenderness but who transformed it according to Western European traditions.

No. 6

Diptych, 16th century, tempera on wood, height 19.2 cm, thickness 1.5 cm, Langmuir 85

*Left panel:* Crucifixion. This sixteenth-century form of the Crucifixion includes three main figures: Christ on the Cross flanked by Mary and John. The cross is standing on a low mound on which the skull of Adam is depicted. Mary and John's gestures reflect the Ethiopian manner of expressing sorrow. The sun and moon depicted anthropomorphically above the cross reflect the belief that the sun darkened and the moon turned red at the time of the Crucifixion.

*Right panel:* Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. The style of representing the Virgin is similar to No. 5.

No. 6







The subject of the Crucifixion appears in a number of icons, though less frequently than that of the Virgin. In some fifteenth-century icons the angels are depicted in the process of collecting blood from the wounds of Christ. This theme has been rarely used in later icons and that is why icon No. 7 from the seventeenth century is of particular interest.

The form of representing the Crucifixion which developed in the sixteenth century became canonical for Ethiopian painters. The composition shows three main figures: namely, Christ on the cross, Mary on the left and John on the right, both expressing their grief. The sun which “darkened” and the moon “which became blood”, according to the well-known Ethiopian commentary, appear above the cross. The skull of Adam depicted at the foot of the cross illustrates another Ethiopian and Christian tradition: namely, that the cross was set up exactly on the spot where Adam was buried, i.e., Golgotha “hill of skulls”. The robbers flanking Christ, who usually are depicted in early Ethiopian images of the Crucifixion, are rarely seen in icons of the sixteenth century and after that virtually disappear. Instead, in the seventeenth century, there appeared a narrow background silhouetting the cross which perhaps was meant to represent clouds, or an aura; later, stars falling from a dark blue sky were an eighteenth-century addition.

Ethiopians did not follow the Western European manner of representing the Resurrection, which was Christ’s emergence from an open tomb. Instead, they accepted the Eastern symbolic image of the Redeemer’s descent to Limbo to liberate the righteous (the Athanasian Creed). This image of the Resurrection became characteristic of the Ethiopian panel paintings. The painters reduced the Byzantine-Greek scheme to three figures: namely, that of Christ in the middle and that of the first parents, Adam and Eve, flanking him. Moreover, they added the banner of victory which the Redeemer holds in his hand (No. 7). Also, the gesture of Christ lifting Adam and Eve from their graves is gradually replaced by the image of Christ blessing with His raised right hand (No. 8). This rather static expression of a theme, which has lost much of its spiritual expression, is somewhat enhanced by the gorgeous Moorish garment of Christ, an obvious attempt to improve the decorative value of the image and enhance the glory of the Resurrection.

The theme of the so-called Covenant of Mercy (icon No. 10) seems to be a genuine Ethiopian composition. It appeared first in seventeenth-century paintings and since then has been a standard subject of Christian art in Ethiopia. The composition represents an alleged promise given by Christ to His mother that “whatever she asks will be granted”. This belief in Mary’s extensive power of intercession, important in Ethiopian religious thinking, contributed greatly to her popularity among Ethiopian people. In representations of the Covenant of Mercy, Christ either holds Mary’s hand or blesses her and thus passes on symbolically the power of intercession.

## No. 7

Triptych, late 16th or early 17th century, tempera on wood, height 41 cm, thickness 2.7 cm, Langmuir 91

*Center panel:* Upper register, Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. This style of representing the Virgin is derived from the well-known painting in the church of St. Maria Maggiore, Rome. Lower register, Christ teaching the twelve Apostles. The two small figures on the right side represent two popular local saints, Takla Haymanot and Ewostatewos.

*Left panel:* Upper register, descent of Christ into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; lower register, St. George slaying a dragon and rescuing the king’s daughter, Birutawit, who was given to the dragon as a sacrifice. The four heads shown above St. George probably represent spectators to the event.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Crucifixion similar to No. 6 with the addition of three angels who are collecting Christ’s blood, a theme that came to Ethiopia in the late fifteenth century from Western European art; middle register, burial of Christ. Joseph of Arimathea and Nikodemos are shown carrying the body of Christ wrapped in a cloth, which reflects the Ethiopian manner of burial; lower register, Flight into Egypt. Here Joseph, husband of Mary, is depicted carrying a gourd container, Salome holds a pottery vessel in her hand and a basket on her head while Mary and Jesus carry a live chicken. This scene could, in fact, reflect a typical Ethiopian peasant family while traveling.

The backs of the panels are gesso covered and the side panels have a painted interlacing border. The reverse of the right panel also bears a painted cross in a circle.



No. 8  
Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 39 cm, thickness 2.1 cm, Langmuir 94

Center panel: Upper register, Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael; lower register, twelve Apostles.

Left panel: Upper register, Christ's descent into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; middle register, Covenant of Mercy; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon.

Right panel: Upper register, Crucifixion, with typical seventeenth-century silhouetting of cross; middle register, local saints, Takla Haymanot and Ewostawos; lower register, three local saints with Gabra Masfay Qiddus on left.

No. 9  
Side panels of a Triptych, late 16th century or early 17th century, tempera on wood, height 31 cm, thickness 1.5 cm, Langmuir 98

Left panel: Upper register, Christ's descent into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon.

Right panel: Upper register, Crucifixion, similar to No. 8 except the cross is not placed on a mound and the skull of Adam is omitted; lower register, Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Christ shown under the royal Ethiopian umbrellia is a form developed in the second part of the sixteenth century.

The reverse of the panels are covered with gesso and decorated with a painted interlacing border and symbols of the sun and moon.

No. 9 (Left Panel)





# ICONS

The scenes from Christ's and Mary's lives are occasionally depicted in the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century icons. The rendering of scenes depicting the Flight into Egypt, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, or His teaching of the disciples, is of great cultural interest because of the introduction of indigenous traits into Ethiopian iconography. This is the case in icon No. 7, in which the Flight into Egypt could be, in fact, a picture of an Ethiopian family traveling to the weekly market. Likewise, in icon No. 9, a royal Ethiopian umbrella is shown carried over Christ during his glorious entry into Jerusalem.

Starting with the fifteenth century, the Apostles Peter, Paul, and Andrew have clearly defined iconographic traits, while other Apostles are rendered identically and identified by captions. On the whole, however, the Apostles, with the exception of St. John, are painted as mature, bearded men. In the sixteenth century, however, a large number of them are depicted as beardless youths. This is, of course, not accidental but most probably reflects local commentaries and, perhaps, the physical traits of some Ethiopian people.

The equestrian saints, or martyrs, as they were usually called, always enjoyed great popularity among Ethiopian believers, who eagerly read the passages from the Lectionary and other works of Ethiopian literature describing the strife and exploits of the warrior-martyrs. Among these, Saint George, Theodore, and Marqoryos were most frequently represented in paintings. The martyrs are identified by the hue of their horses: white for George, brown or red for Theodore, and black for Marqoryos. In the fifteenth century, Saint George was depicted riding with his spear slanting upwards. At the end of that century the representations of his combat with the dragon and rescuing of Birutawit, daughter of the king of Beirut, were introduced into Ethiopia and since then have been reproduced in a large number of icons.

Two local religious leaders, Takla Haymanot (c. 1215-1313) and Ewostatewos (c. 1273-1352) are usually represented together. Each of them founded his own monastic order, the members of which at times bitterly competed. In the sixteenth century the other local saint, Gabra Manfas Qiddus, appeared in paintings. This rather mythical personage is believed to have lived in Ethiopia, perhaps in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. He practiced an extreme austerity; he never wore clothing, and as a reward God covered his whole body with hair "as that of a goat". He used to tame lions, leopards, and hyenas, and beginning in the seventeenth century he was often depicted in company of these beasts and with his nudity covered by his own hair.

The quality and variety of the paintings on wood is astonishing. In form, they include single panels, diptyches, and triptyches which were normally made from the olive tree (*Olea africana*) or from the Wanza tree (*Corida abyssinica*). The majority of triptyches are square edged, but some, dating from the sixteenth century, have the upper

No. 9 (Right Panel)







# ICONS

edges rounded. Considering the technical detail of the painting, it is amazing how little preparation was done on the panels, which were first split from larger sections of wood, roughly worked out with an axe and later smoothed with a knife or a leaf from a special tree. Only the roughest areas, such as knotholes or deep axe cuts, were smoothed over with a putty made from gypsum and animal glue. Starting in the seventeenth century, occasionally a cotton cloth similar in weave to canvas was glued to the surface of the panels which offered a more even surface for painting.

The pigments used in the painting were limited and consisted mainly of red cinnabar (red mercury sulphide), yellow orpiment (arsenious trisulphide), charcoal, white gypseous chalk, and indigo blue, an extract from the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*. All were local to Ethiopia except the indigo which was imported from India. The pigments were mixed with an animal protein, forming a tempera which was applied directly to the prepared panel. Varnishes were unknown in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; however, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries vegetable lacquers were used to cover the painted surface.

The backs of many of the panels were covered with a gesso or plaster and sometimes painted with decorative patterns or borders which are often of great beauty and an aid to their dating.

Apparently, painters followed rules governing the arrangement of themes in their compositions and though these rules were never written down, the order of subjects in the triptyches was nonetheless finally established by the seventeenth century. For example, Mary was always depicted in the main panel with the Apostles in the lower register whenever they appeared. Other subjects were displayed as follows: left panel; the Resurrection (top), the Covenant of Mercy (middle) and Saint George (bottom); right panel; the Crucifixion (top) local saints (middle and bottom) equestrian saints other than Saint George (bottom). Some additions and omissions have been made to this scheme, but on the whole it did not change until recently.

## Stanislaw Chojnacki

University of Sudbury  
Ontario, Canada  
1978

No. 10

Triptych, late 18th or early 19th century, tempera on wood, height 36.5 cm, thickness 2 cm, Langmuir 92

This icon is painted in a style which developed after the third decade of the eighteenth century and is characterized by a more realistic approach to the rendering of the human form and a great deal of attention paid to the garments and their ornamentation.

*Center panel:* Covenant of Mercy with attending hosts of angels; lower register, prostrate portrait of the donor-priest who commissioned this triptych to be made.

*Left panel:* Upper register, Christ wearing a crown of thorns; middle register, St. George slaying the dragon; lower register, local saints Gabra Manfas Qiddus, Takla Haymanot, and Ewostatewos.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Christ descending into Limbo to save Adam and Eve and accompanied with angels; lower register, Crucifixion, with darkened sun, red moon, and falling stars.

The reverse of the panels are gesso covered. The center panel is painted green with a yellow border design and a painted cross. The side panels are painted with rosette patterns probably taken from textiles.









No. 11

Detail from folding painted parchment in original embossed leather cover (back cover missing), 15th or early 16th century, length 89 cm, Langmuir 368 See No. 2

Probably painted at a scriptorium influenced by the Monastery of Gunda Gundi.





No. 12

Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 39.6 cm, thickness 2 cm, Langmuir 95

*Center panel:* Upper register, Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. This form of the Virgin is derived both from Greek iconography as reflected in the turned back foot of Jesus and from the Santa Maria Maggiore painting in Rome, evident in the manner of depicting the maphorion of Mary; lower register, a rare subject in Ethiopian icon painting shows Christ washing the feet of the Apostles, while one woman brings water and the other supports the vessel for Christ.

*Left panel:* Upper register, descent of Christ into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; middle register, four local saints, unidentified; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon while the king's daughter, Birutawit, holds the dragon by a rope.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Crucifixion. Here Mary and St. John are depicted crying. The cross is shown silhouetted against a yellow background following the shape of the cross, a way of illustrating the cross characteristic of the seventeenth century. On the foot of the cross is displayed the skull of Adam; middle register, entombment of Christ with Nikodemos and Joseph of Arimathea lamenting; lower register, an equestrian saint with a figure prostrate under the horse (perhaps Marqoryos slaying Julian the Apostate).

The reverse of the panels are gesso covered or partially covered and have a painted upper border, consisting of a single green line on the center panel and three parallel lines, blue, red, and green on the side panels.





Diptych, probably 16th century, tempera on wood, height 9.6 cm, Langmuir 79

*Left panel:* Four local saints. The embracing posture of the two upper saints is characteristic of the fifteenth century. The saints wear black and brown hoods used by Ethiopian monks, which are frequently depicted on icons dating from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

*Right Panel:* Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael holding swords. The left hand of Mary is poised in the style of blessing found in Eastern iconography.

Double triptych, 16th century, tempera on wood, height 9.5 cm, Langmuir 83

*Left panel:* "Unidentified female saint and St. Mark identified by the inscription "this is a picture of Marqôs".

*Center panel:* Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. The style of representation is in the Eleousa form or Virgin of Tenderness. Right panel: Two saints, probably the Apostles Peter (white hair) and Paul (black hair).

*Reverse of right panel (not illustrated):* St. George represented in the fifteenth-century style with his spear slanting upwards and no dragon present. The reverse of the center and left panels are gesso covered and bear a painted design in red and black consisting of parallel lines.





No. 15

Double Portable Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 9.1 cm, thickness 2 cm, Langmuir 117

This form of portable triptych with its pierced lug at the top was worn suspended around the neck.

*Main center panel:* Virgin and Child with Archangels Gabriel and Michael.

*Main center panel cover:* St. George.

*Reverse of center panel:* Two local saints, Takla Haymanot and Ewostatewos (not illustrated).

*Reverse center panel cover:* local saints, Abib, Kiros, and Gabra Manfas Qiddus with a lion (not illustrated).

The icon is covered with gesso and each center panel cover has a red painted cross.

No. 16

Portable Diptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 9.4 cm, thickness .8 cm, Langmuir 80

*Left panel:* Descent into Limbo to save Adam and Eve.

*Right panel:* Crucifixion according to the early seventeenth-century pattern.

The backs of the panels are gesso covered and bear painted borders and black crosses.

No. 17

Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 30 cm, thickness 1.8 cm, Langmuir 112

*Center panel:* Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael.

*Left panel:* Upper register, Crucifixion flanked by Mary and Joseph and showing the darkened sun and the moon which turned red at the time of the Crucifixion. The figure of Christ shows a strong baroque influence; middle register, four Apostles; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Christ descending into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; middle and lower register, eight Apostles.

The reverse of the panels are thinly covered with gesso and each bears a hand cross painted black.

No. 16







No. 18



No. 18

Pendant Triptychs, 17th century, height 8.3 cm, thickness 1.6 and height 9.6 cm, thickness 1.4 cm, Langmuir 65 and 110

Covers and sides show elaborate surface carving which includes crosses, interlaces and lozenges.

No. 19



No. 20

No. 19

Double Pendant Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 11.6 cm, thickness 3 cm, Langmuir 64

Main center panel: Virgin and Child flanked by Archangels Gabriel and Michael.

Main center panel cover: St. George slaying the dragon.

Reverse of center panel: Crucifixion (not illustrated).

Reverse center panel cover: Christ's descent into Limbo (not illustrated).

The center panel covers are elaborately carved and painted red and green. In addition, the right and left side of the center panel bears two images of Archangels.





No. 21

Triptych, 17th century, tempera on wood, height 35 cm, thickness 2 cm, Langmuir 111

*Center panel:* Upper register, Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael and one of the twelve Apostles; lower register, ten Apostles.

*Left panel:* Upper register, Christ's descent into Limbo to save Adam and Eve; middle register, Covenant of Mercy; lower register, St. George slaying the dragon.

*Right panel:* Upper register, Crucifixion with typical seventeenth-century silhouetting of the cross; middle register, probably local saints, Takla Haymanot and Ewostatewos; lower register, the twelfth Apostle and probably Gabra Manfas Qid-dus.

This triptych is similar in style and execution to No. 17.

No. 20

Pendant Diptych, 18th century, tempera on wood, height 15.8 cm, thickness 1.4 cm, Langmuir 74

*Main panel:* Virgin and Child flanked by the Archangels Gabriel and Michael. Portions painted in gold were added at a later date.

*Main panel cover:* St. George slaying the dragon, painted in a style which developed after the third decade of the eighteenth century.

The reverse of the panels are gesso covered and the reverse of the main panel is painted with parallel red, yellow, and green lines.







No. 22  
Processional Cross, 20th century, brass, height 57.7  
cm. Longmuir 108



## CROSSES

Perhaps nowhere else in the world has the cross as a symbol been proliferated into such a myriad of forms as in Ethiopia.

The first evidence of the use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity occurred on coins minted at the time of King Ezana in the fourth century A.D. They were stamped with simple Latin or Greek crosses, sometimes enclosed in a circle, but little is known of the evolution of the cross in the early centuries of the Christian Era. Some have been found in archaeological excavations, but few found in churches or monasteries can be dated with any certainty to before the eleventh century. In fact, stylistic dating of crosses is yet in its infancy, and only in the 1960's and 1970's, principally with the work of Eine Moore, has a rough framework for their dating evolved. Because of this the dated crosses in this catalogue must be accepted as only tentative. Grouped functionally, there are three basic types of crosses: processional, hand, and pendant crosses worn around the neck.

**Processional Crosses** The largest and often most elaborate crosses are those mounted on poles which raise them above the heads of worshippers in a procession or during services. Surviving examples of processional crosses indicate that copper, bronze, and iron were the favored materials of early crosses and that brass became more in vogue in the sixteenth century and later. Few gold or silver crosses have survived, and ones carved in wood are rare.

Crosses were generally made in the "lost-wax" method, either in one piece or in as many as four sections which were then riveted or welded together. A cross modeled and carved in wax was encased in moist clay which was then allowed to dry and harden. The whole was then fired so that the melted wax would run out through small apertures left in the clay. Through these apertures molten metal was then poured to completely replace the wax cross. After cooling, the mold was broken to reveal a metal replica of the wax original. The "lost-wax" process allows great freedom of design, and the variety of forms we find today are in part the result of this technique, which allows no two crosses to be exactly the same. Crosses cut from metal sheets are occasionally encountered, but these tend to be thin and less elaborate in design.

No. 23



No. 23

Processional Cross, 14th or 15th century, copper or bronze, height 25.5 cm. Langmuir 62

This form of cross (Lalibela cross) is found in Lasta Province in the region of the famous Lalibela Churches.

No. 24  
Processional Cross, 19th century, brass, height 37  
cm, Langmuir 106.







No. 25  
Processional Cross, 18th century style, brass,  
height 48 cm, Langmuir 59.

The cross is engraved on both sides. On the superior arm that is illustrated are the Virgin and Child flanked by two archangels. In the center is a prostrate figure representing the individual who commissioned the cross. On the right and left arms are shown St. George slaying a dragon and the saint, Takla Haymanot.



No. 26  
Hand Crosses, 17th or 18th century styles, wood,  
height 42.1 - 86.8 cm, Langmuir 426, 4 and 8



## CROSSES

**Hand Crosses** Generally much smaller than processional crosses, hand crosses were continually carried by priests, particularly in processions or during services. Some of the larger crosses in this category, however, were also used as altar crosses in church ceremonies (No. 26). The hand cross was kept convenient at all times, either by being suspended from a cord around the neck or in a small leather holster (No. 27). On meeting a layman, the priest would present his cross to the parishioner who would touch the cross with his forehead and then kiss it as a sign of piety.

Hand crosses are provided with short handles and often a square base which some scholars have suggested represents the "tabot" or consecrated slab identified with the Ark of the Covenant, or the tablets of law it contained. This interesting facet is one of many Judaic elements found in the Ethiopian church. It is believed that the original Ark of the Covenant was brought to Ethiopia from the Temple of Jerusalem in the time of the Queen of Sheba and Menilik I. In any event, this small square or oblong at the base of the cross often provides space for incised or stamped designs and inscriptions. Hand crosses occur most commonly in iron, brass, silver, and wood. Iron ones appear to be the earliest and are still today the most common.

In the seventeenth century, with the rise of the Gondarine Dynasty, a characteristic type of cross evolved that has distinctive flared arms. The "lost-wax" method of making crosses in brass and silver permitted the production of elaborate crosses and facilitated the copying of earlier styles; however, even hammered crosses in iron continued to reproduce earlier styles making dating often very difficult.

No. 27



No. 27

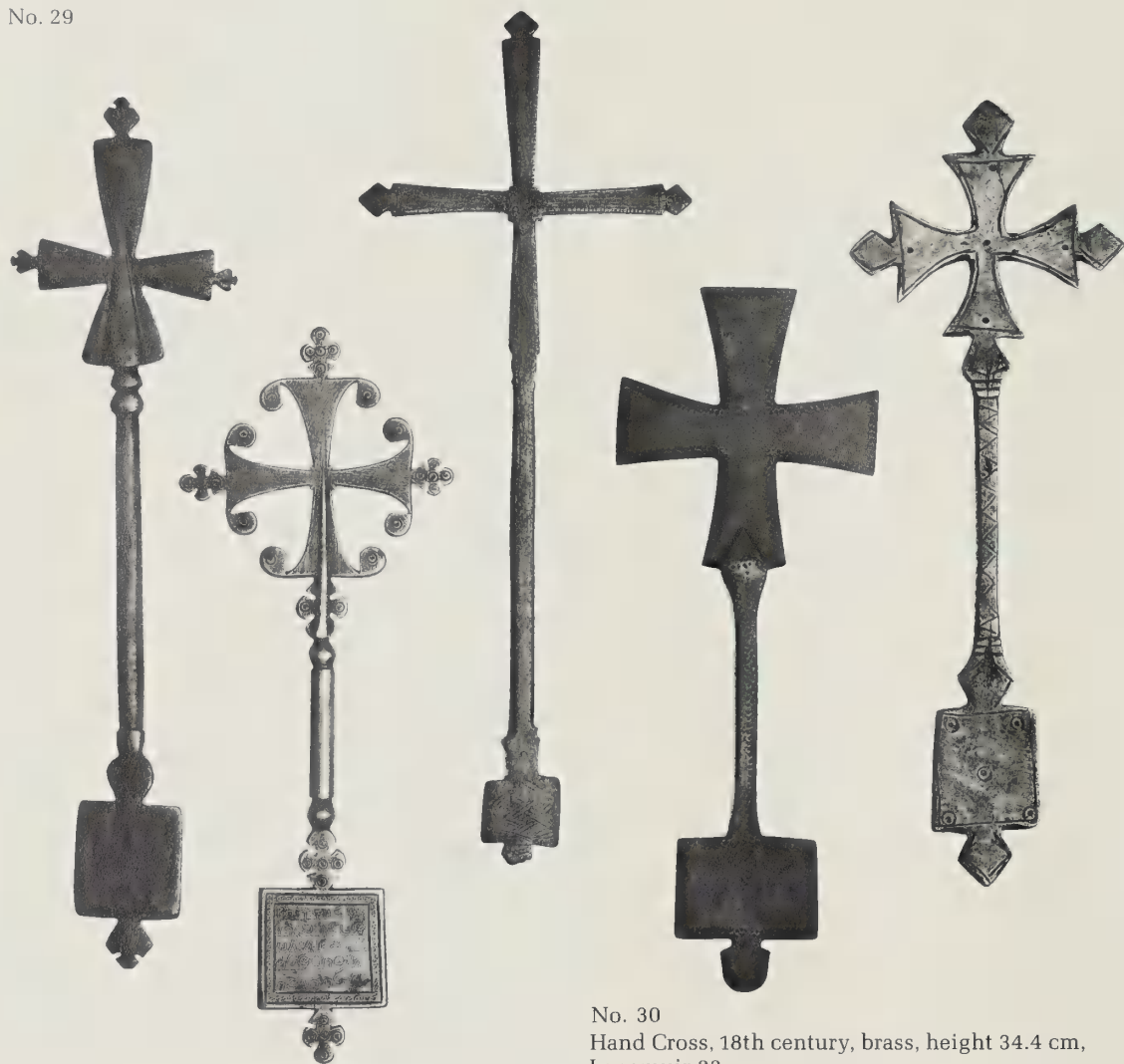
Cross and holster, brass and leather, height of cross 23 cm, Langmuir 383

No. 28

Hand Cross, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 23 cm, Langmuir 43.

Inscription: "Abba Zikrē Mariam Ketema".

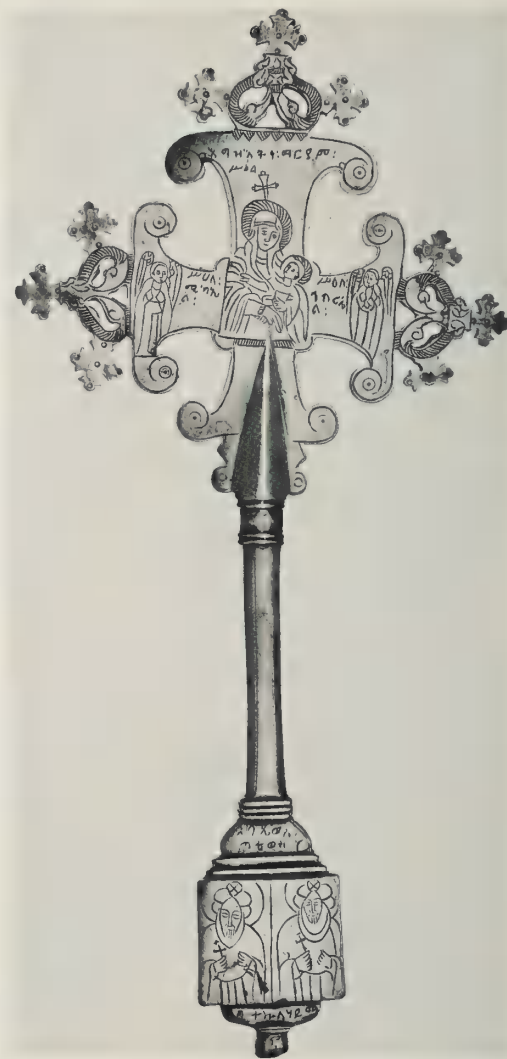




No. 29  
Hand Crosses, cut and hammered iron  
a. Langmuir 38, height 27.9 cm; b. Langmuir 388,  
height 23.5 cm, 17th century style, but made in  
1942 according to the inscription; c. Langmuir 39,  
height 27.3 cm, 14th to 16th century style;  
d. Langmuir 15, height 22.6 cm; e. Langmuir 63,  
height 25.2 cm.

No. 30  
Hand Cross, 18th century, brass, height 34.4 cm,  
Langmuir 23.

The Cross is engraved on both sides and bears  
identifying inscriptions. On the side illustrated,  
the superior arm is inscribed "Our Lady Mary". To  
the left of Mary "The Picture of Michael" and to  
her right "The Picture of Gabriel". On the base of  
the cross is inscribed "Abba Ewostatewos" and  
"Abba Takla Haymanot".







No. 31  
Hand Crosses, 18th - 20th century, wood, height  
22.2 to 30 cm, Langmuir 9, 390, 14 and 10.

No. 32



No. 34



No. 32

Neck Cross, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 3.6 cm, Langmuir 305.

No. 33

Neck Crosses, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 6 cm, 3.8 cm, and 4.8 cm, Langmuir 288, 311 and 313.

No. 34

Neck Cross, 18th - 20th century, silver, height 5.4 cm, Langmuir 262.

No. 35

Neck Crosses, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 4.8 cm, and 4.3 cm, Langmuir 258 and 251.

No. 36

Neck Cross, 19th century, silver, height 5.3 cm, Langmuir 160.

No. 37

Neck Crosses, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 4.4 cm, and 3.3 cm, Langmuir 207 and 202.

No. 38

Neck Crosses, 19th or 20th century, silver wash over copper and silver, height 7.8 cm, and 5.8 cm, Langmuir 121 and 128.

No. 39

Pendant Maria Theresa Dollar and Neck Cross, 18th or 19th century, silver, height 4.9 cm, and 5 cm, Langmuir 393 and 394.

No. 40

Ear wax picks, 19th or 20th century, silver, height 6.5 cm, and 6.6 cm, Langmuir 422 and 414.

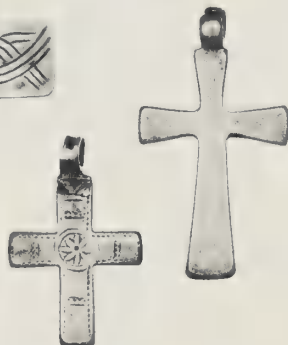
No. 41

Star of David pendants with superimposed Lion of Judah and Cross, 20th century, height 6.5 cm, and 6.6 cm, Langmuir 248, 261.

No. 42

Neck Crosses 19th or 20th century, silver, height 8.6 cm, and 5.2 cm, Langmuir 223 and 211.

No. 33



No. 35



No. 37



No. 38





# CROSSES

**Neck Crosses** Neck crosses form a category composed of small crosses suspended from a cord or chain and worn around the neck. They are by far the most numerous and occur in an infinite variety.

Since the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia the sign of the faith has been a blue cord or “matab” worn around the neck after baptism. Often a cross was added to the “matab”, and in the fifteenth century the practice became law when Emperor Zara Ya'gob decreed that all Christians should wear a neck cross. Portuguese writers of the sixteenth century mention neck crosses made of wood, but few of these have survived. Excavations have indicated that the earliest neck crosses were made of bronze, copper, and occasionally gold. Small crosses carved in soapstone seem to be a recent phenomenon and form an insignificant part of any collection.

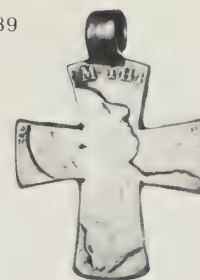
Most neck crosses are made of silver which may be relatively pure, alloyed, or used as a wash over brass. Silver was relatively rare in Ethiopia until the nineteenth century when Maria Theresa dollars were imported from Austria in great quantities to be used as currency. For this reason almost all silver crosses are believed to date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Maria Theresa dollars were generally melted down and the crosses cast in the “lost-wax” method. Two-piece molds and half-molds have also been used, but these however are believed to be a recent introduction. Crosses cut directly from Maria Theresa dollars, which were first thinned by hammering to eliminate the minted impressions, also occur. However, in rare cases no attempt was made to disguise the origin of the cross by hammering, and, occasionally, one can find a cross bearing the bust of Maria Theresa (No. 39).

Neck crosses are attached to the cord worn around the neck by a small ring welded or cast directly to the superior arm or in some cases, to a superior finial which, in turn, is hinged to the cross. Ear wax picks are common in Ethiopia and occasionally the cross is incorporated into their design, thereby combining the two functions in one object (No. 40). A variant of the cross is the Star of David, which may bear the impression of a cross or the Lion of Judah (No. 41).

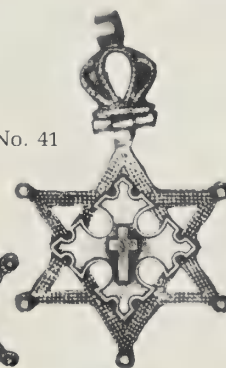
Many neck crosses exhibit “filigree” and “appliqué” techniques used by silversmiths who also made Ethiopian jewelry. Decorative additions include twisted, beaded, or plain wire, and tiny silver beads or convex discs welded to the cross. Crosses utilizing these techniques are, with the exception of “lost-wax” cast crosses, the most commonly found (No. 42).



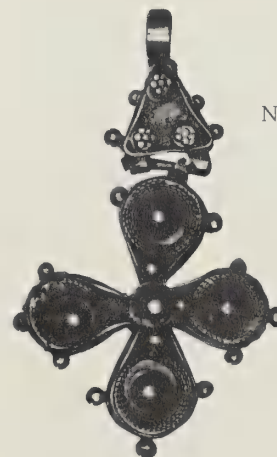
No. 39



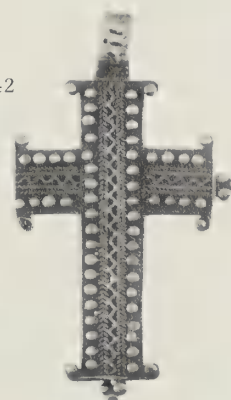
No. 41



No. 40



No. 42





No. 43

Prayer-stick finials or "Maguamia"

Left, Langmuir 51, 20th century, brass, height 11 cm; middle, Langmuir 50, before the 18th century, iron, height 20.4 cm; right, Langmuir 52, 20th century, brass with engraving of a saint and three angels, height 24.7 cm.

The Prayer-stick is used to mark rhythm during sacred dances and also as a support during the long Ethiopian service.

No. 44

Crown, 18th - 19th century, brass, height 33 cm, Langmuir 114.

Worn by priests and deacons in processions and church ceremonies.

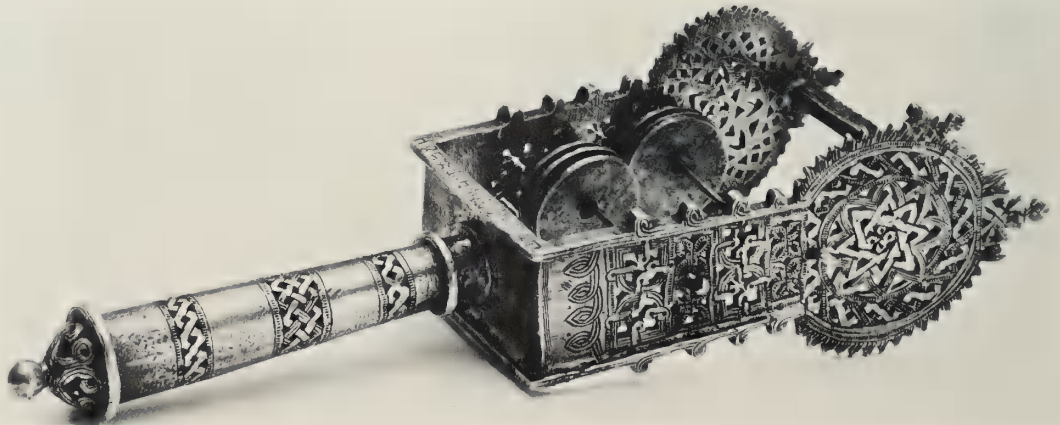
No. 45

Sistrum, 18th - 19th century, silver, height 22.2 cm, Langmuir 385.

The sistrum is used as a rattle to mark time during the Ethiopian service. It is an ancient instrument which probably originated in Africa and was the symbol of ritual music in Egypt.



No. 45



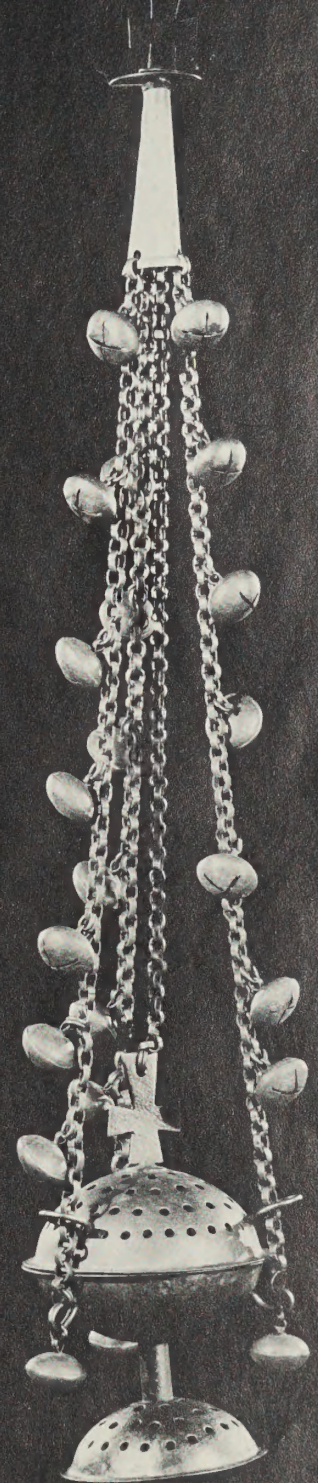


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No. 46

Incense burner, 18th - 20th century, iron, height  
86.5 cm, Langmuir 370.





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